

# trail & track

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## EUROPEAN PREVIEW

We take a sneak look at the works motocrossers for '76

## TRAIL THUMPER

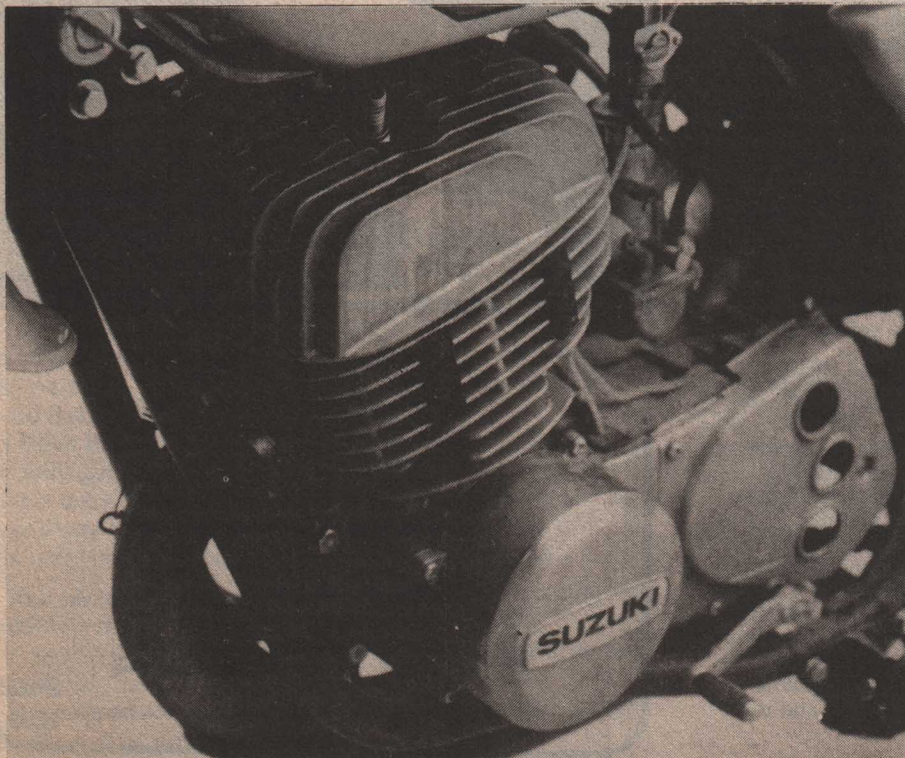
Yamaha's TT500c converted for enduro!





# SUZUKI 400 TRAIL

## (at long last it now works)



Every year we test a Suzuki 400 trailbike, and every year we say it's sweet in some ways but a few basic faults write it off. So when we were offered a TS400M for our annual jaunt we naturally expected the same old tired design and thought the subsequent article would be a "carbon copy" of last year's except for the change of spelling mistakes!

However, two things made this TS400 test different:—

- 1) An enthusiastic dealer offered us his own personal machine;
  - 2) Suzuki, hard as it may be to believe, have made one or two changes to the bike. (Shouts of order — Ed.)
- Everybody knows the faults with the tired old TS400, so-all-together-now:— it's too heavy, the underslung exhaust pipe restricts clearance, the suspension is nothing special, for 400 cubes it's not too powerful and worst of all the gearing is way out. These are basic design faults which the private owner cannot correct himself, and true to form Suzuki have done "stuff all" about them for 1976.

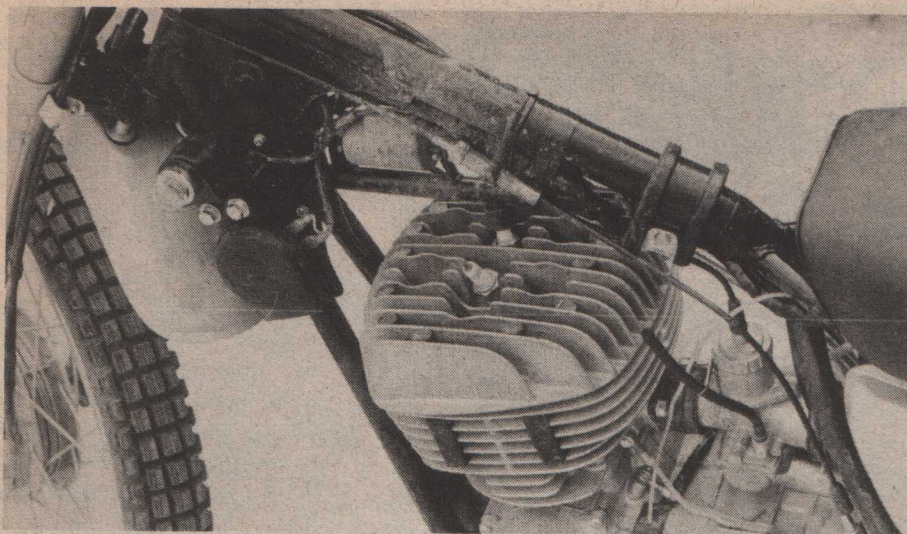
But, wait a minute; they may not have changed the fundamental layout to eradicate any of those mistakes, yet they have altered a few things inside the engine (carburetion etc.) to let the big lazy engine show more of its true form. Though it may only be a very small mod it reacts in a vital way insomuch as to enable the motor to keep plonking at low revs up a hill and not stall. Hey presto, their bush track bike can now be rated in with the serious trail machines.

That they took three years to get that far is disgusting. Let's face it, the latest Suzuki large trailster is about the same level for 1976 as Yamaha's DT360 was in 1973. That's not prejudice, that's hard fact. But then Suzuki have always been slow in developing their off-road bikes; it wasn't until last year that they dragged themselves out of a hole in the motocross field and brought out a new range of MX racers that are as good as any; after three years making uncompetitive, low selling machines. Maybe we're saying that later on this year we'll see the near vintage 250 Savage and this 400 radically redesigned; Christ knows, they should be.

Our bike was lent to us by Cheltenham Suzuki man (O.K. his shop is just down the road from our office), Bill Ford. Bill has ridden many 400s, including campaigning a much modified TM400 for a motocross season. After uncrating the new machine he immediately set about a few fundamental modifications. They included:

- 1) replacing wheel bearing grease and balancing the wheels.
- 2) modifying the rear light and carrier.
- 3) fitting a Bosch 260 plug.
- 4) refitting the rear cush drive for





improved action.

5) substituting TM units on the rear instead of the standard things.

6) filling the forks with the correct amount of A.T.F.

7) re-tuning the carburetion for accuracy. This included dropping the main jet from 122.5 to 120 and putting the needle on the lowest setting. The oil was then suitably weakened.

So that was the bike we took on test. Not a wild 400 by any means, but a sensibly and well prepared trail machine in the Japanese sense of the word.

With no engine decompressor as such this "M" model was kicked over on the determined side. A year or two ago we'd have been a bit afraid of it, but since then we've ridden the 400 Jawa and learnt what heavy kicking is all about.

It starts easily and reliably tumbles over at 1500 rpm, typically typical of such a Japanese bike. The big surprise comes when letting the clutch in, it plonks away like a proper trail engine should. Previous model 400s have found it impossible to pull the stupidly high first gear and naturally die in the arse when faced with a long climb. Suzuki had two ways of curing this:—

1) redesign a new 5 speed gearbox with a proper internal ratio spread (very expensive), or

2) lower the stage of engine output to improve bottom end pulling power.

Slight changes to the engine and carburettor cost no more on the production line so they opted for the obvious. The result is a flexible engine without any harsh powerband whatsoever. It just comes in at tickover and gently rises to the red line. Unfortunately, you can't have it both ways and what Suzuki have gained low down they have lost up top. Attention to detail has meant little has disappeared from flat out performance, but when fighting a big Yamaha the difference does become, well you know, sort of embarrassing. Anyway, if you want a desert bike then go buy a cantilever enduro and try using that as an all round trail machine like this Suzuki.

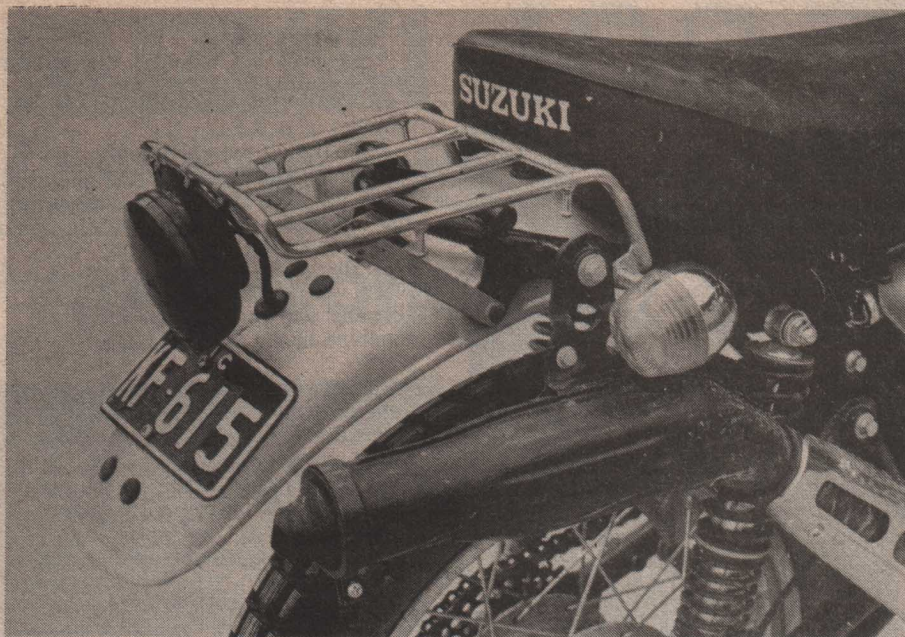
Although the good power spread which is usefully in at 1600 rpm and says "change up" at 3500 rpm is just perfect for the leisurely rider, flat out revving to the red line of 6200 gives 25, 42, 50, 60 and 71 mph. That's slow for a 400, Suzuki should have changed the gearbox.

Because of the stage of development, a rider never has to take the revs over 5000, the bike will perform better by pulling a higher gear. The power spread really is that docile.

While the boy racers, part-time scramblers and hard core enduro men may well laugh at such a slow engine, we must say that this big bike takes a man on a leisurely trail ride absolutely effortlessly. It really is an enjoyable off-roader for people who prefer a BIG LAZY engine.

We could be wrong by accusing Suzuki of cheap economics as they probably want it this way. Even if their





adverts do say the bike is competitive with other 350—400s (which it isn't in a fast enduro) it does some things the others can't and has a charm all of its own. The low sales of the 400 probably means that Suzuki aren't getting their message across properly as to the precise role of the big TS or, as is surely the case, most leisurely trail riders buy a small capacity bike.

Enough philosophising.

The front brake was ultra progressive and very nice too. No lock, plenty of feel. Not the most powerful on the road though.

Forks are a little bit better than before. The springs are still a bit on the hard side.

As usual the headlight is the same massive thing with stickduddy-out flashers. Not the best for the bush. Too road oriented in this department.

What can we say about the low slung exhaust other than it gets in the way? It gets in the way.

The chain guide-guard for the low run drops off when the rider whispers "rough going".

Oh, we are enjoying this rubbishing session.

And another thing, the rear brake's not the best. It's odd how they can get it right at the front and sink back into bad habits for the rear.

Anymore for any more?

Of course, thank Christ TM rear units were fitted, Suzuki should do it as standard.

If you're a road-cum-off-road trail type rider then you'll appreciate the plastic coated (well, rubber anyway) footpegs and the provision for rear pegs. If you're not, you won't.

Back onto the plus side, the seat suits the character of the bike a treat. This thing is sit down comfort in complete quiet. The engine doesn't rattle and the exhaust doesn't bark (at that huge size it shouldn't). The TS400M is a beaut leisurely trail riding "see the hills" machine. The package is absolutely along those lines.

Easily pulling the overall weight the engine recorded some excellent fuel consumption figures. Riding flat out between 60 and 80 mph (yes, into the red line) the 1¾ gallon fuel tank went nearly for 100 miles which is amazing. And talking of revving it off the clock, the motor will sing out at nearly 80 mph all day without protest.

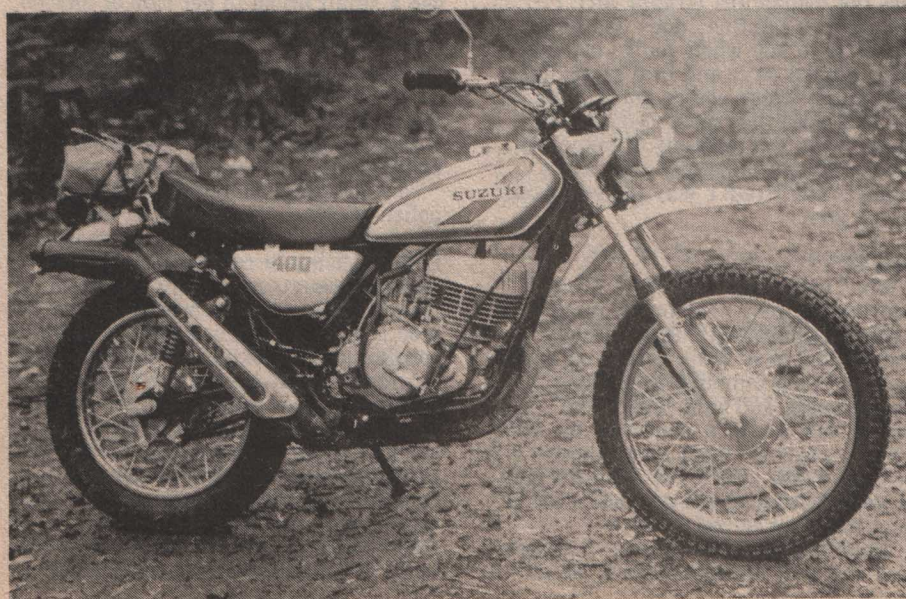
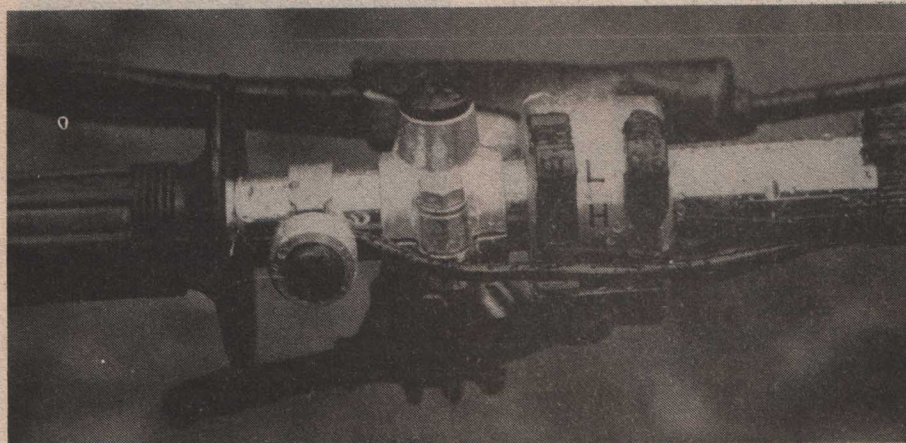
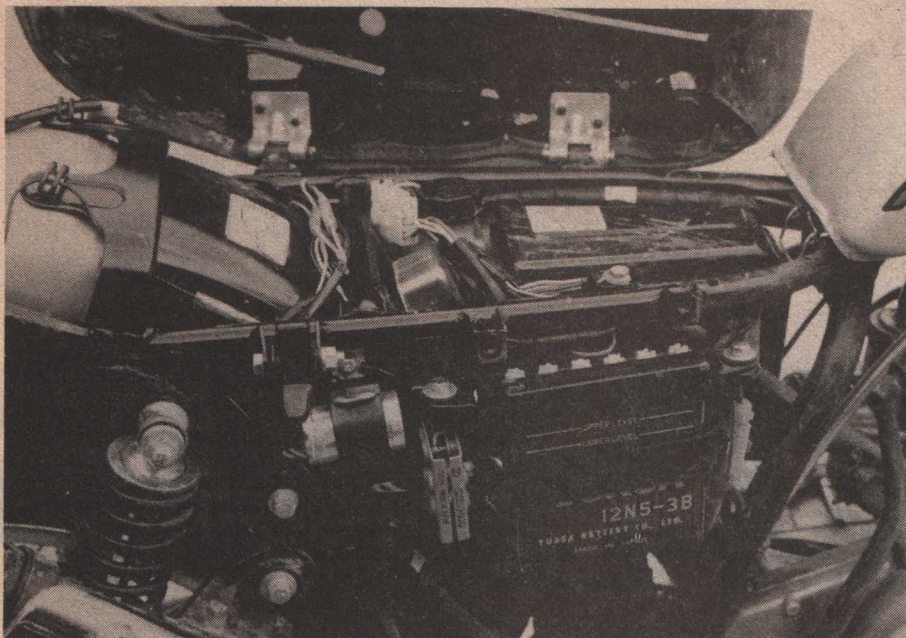
Surely Suzuki can alter a few things on this bike to make it just right? We put forward these thoughts:—

#### THE "WHAT SUZUKI SHOULD DO" BIT

If Suzy mean this machine to be just a relaxed, off-road tourer then they need do little. But they can definitely improve the all round trail performance by making the following alteration:—

1. A large underslung exhaust has to mean a lower ground clearance and higher centre of gravity to some degree. They should develop a thru-the-frame exhaust which would either maintain the same ground clearance





with a lower centre of gravity, or have the same balance point with a big clearance. Either way the gain would be positive.

2. Softer rate fork springs are needed.
3. Better rear units (i.e. TM) are necessary.
4. A trail bike should have a trailbike gearbox NOT a version of its motocross brother. This feature is long overdue.
5. If a chainguide is fitted then at least let it have some strength. Bashes in this area are inevitable and a bit more spent on thicker metal is required.
6. Maybe, readjust the output in-line with other large capacity trail bikes.

The above would make the TS400 (. . . N?) a far better all round machine. All Suzuki then have to do is decide on the bike's intended usage and retain the huge standard lights and battery or fit fashionable "trail" versions.

#### THE "WHAT AN OWNER CAN DO" BIT

1. Well first of all, a preparation job something like our test bike would go down a bundle.  
The rest are all assuming the bike is going to be used mainly in the bush.
2. Rip off the massive lights and huge battery. Smaller replacements are far more practical. The instruments and electrical controls can also be rethought to advantage.
3. Metzeler Six Days tyres are our choice of rubber.
4. Alloy bars aren't a gimmick, they're definitely worthwhile.
5. It's possible to go over to petrol. A mod of debatable worth (we'd advise the standard set-up.)
6. Taper the leading edges of the rear brake linings.
7. Adjust the size of the rear sprockets to suit individual terrain and riding style.
8. Think, before attempting to hot up the engine.

Personally, we'd prefer this type of engine with a decent set of gears through a lower frame that's sprung a bit better and doesn't have to pull so much street legal junk. But no two people interpret the word "trail" the same way as we all like a different type of bike for our own kind of use.

The TS400M is the complete opposite to, say, a Yamaha IT400C cantilever enduro. That doesn't mean it's inferior; in some ways it's better and will prove so over complementary terrain. The difficulty for Suzuki comes in explaining their version of trail riding to the buying public. If they could do that with a few basic modifications then the TS400 (. . . N?) would very rightly settle into a secure corner of the market. Until then, it's XL350s, Alpinas and the like.